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Viewing cable 08ANKARA173, TURKEY: KARAMANLIS VISIT PAVES WAY FOR IMPROVED

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08ANKARA173	2008-01-30 14:59	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Ankara

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: KARAMANLIS VISIT PAVES WAY FOR IMPROVED
BILATERAL RELATIONS

REF: A. ANKARA 102
1B. ISTANBUL 43

Classified By: CDA Nancy McEldowney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis' January 23-25 trip to Turkey symbolizes the improved state of Turkish-Greek relations. During his meeting with PM Erdogan, the two Prime Ministers focused on how to overcome the three most contentious bilateral issues -- Cyprus, the Aegean, and minority rights. Although no final agreements were reached, Erdogan and Karamanlis agreed on several new channels of dialogue to accelerate the process. Publicly, both leaders praised the new era of good will. Karamanlis reiterated Greek support for Turkey's EU bid and Erdogan made positive, yet vague, statements regarding the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Turkish media praised Karamanlis for his bravery in making the domestically unpopular trip. The success of the visit gives PM Erdogan space to take on several of the more controversial aspects of the bilateral relationship in the coming months. End Summary.

12. (C) While Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis' January 23-25 trip to Turkey did not result in any formal deliverables or public commitments, the visit itself marks an historic step forward for the bilateral relationship. During a two-and-one-half hour meeting, January 23, Prime Ministers Karamanlis and Erdogan discussed Cyprus, the Aegean, and reciprocal minority rights. MFA Deputy U/S for the Americas and NE Mediterranean Haydar Berk told us the two leaders agreed that 2008 is a "window of opportunity" to seek progress on all three issues. To do so, the GOG and GOT will accelerate exploratory talks at the U/S level on the Aegean, increase ministerial engagement on minority rights, and enhance maritime and civil aviation cooperation (ref a).

13. (C) On Cyprus, Berk noted, the two sides still hold differing opinions, but agreed on general principles including the need to relaunch the UN process following the Cyprus elections. MFA Deputy Director General for Greece Kerin Uras reported Erdogan asked Karamanlis to increase pressure on the Greek Cypriots to "constructively engage." Karamanlis expressed hesitancy to do so, as previous attempts to influence Nicosia had proven counterproductive.

14. (C) Overall, Berk characterized Karamanlis' visit as successful, noting that both sides tried to focus on "the full side of the glass." An informal agreement between the Turkish and Greek General Staffs to avoid maritime or airspace incidents one day prior until one day after the talks allowed the leaders to maintain a positive tone. Berk added that the soon-to-be-voted-on Foundations Law will lay the groundwork for resolving many of the Greek minority property disputes, including Halki.

15. (C) At a joint press conference, both leaders spoke of increasing good will and cooperation. Erdogan stated that political, military, economic, and cultural relations will improve in the coming months. Turkey and Greece will tackle "non-problematic" issues first and then progress to more contentious ones. Karamanlis' comments reflected Erdogan's positive tone and the potential for greatly improved relations. He repeated his position on Turkey's EU membership -- full compliance, full membership. In response to press questions, Karamanlis said that, from the Greek perspective, the only problem in the Aegean is the issue of the continental shelf. He also urged the GOT to allow the opening of the Halki seminary and to recognize the ecumenical status of the Patriarch. Erdogan responded that the GOT was "evaluating" the Halki seminary, and that the ecumenical issue is an internal matter of the Orthodox Church.

16. (C) Before leaving for Istanbul on January 24, Karamanlis also met with President Gul and opposition leader Deniz Baykal. Baykal told the press that during his meeting with

Karamanlis, he expressed support for the Annan Plan and noted it would be difficult for a secular state such as Turkey to open the door to religious education being provided through entities such as Halki seminary. During a speech to students at Ankara's Bilkent University, Karamanlis said "The time has come to solve the Cyprus issue. Nicosia is the last obstacle for Turkey with the EU." In Istanbul, Karamanlis and his delegation of 160 Greek businessmen met with representatives of the Turkish-Greek businessmen's associations, Economic Policy Research Forum of Turkey (TEPAV), and Turkish Union of Chambers of Commodities and Commerce (TOBB) to discuss how to improve bilateral trade.

¶17. (SBU) The Turkish press warmly received the Greek Prime Minister's visit and focused on its symbolism. One journalist optimistically wrote, "the friendship and cooperation has begun." Most major media outlets praised Karamanlis for his courage in traveling to Turkey and highlighted the gentlemen's agreement to avoid maritime or aviation incidents that might have sullied the visit. Karamanlis' January 24 meeting with Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul was largely ignored by the press (ref b).

¶18. (C) Comment: Although a few naysayers highlighted Karamanlis' public mention of minority issues and the Aegean dispute, the vast majority of Turks welcomed the new era in bilateral relations. Erdogan escaped criticism; many portrayed him as the consummate statesman. The success of the visit, the absence of incident, and the promise of Greek support for Turkey's EU bid should strengthen Erdogan's hand domestically, and perhaps allow him to take on in coming months some of the more controversial issues that have vexed Turkish-Greek relations for years. End Comment.

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